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The Mountain Partnership: activities and achievements

Report prepared by the Mountain Partnership secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The Mountain Partnership (originally known as the International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions) is an evolving, multistakeholder, voluntary alliance dedicated to improving the well-being, livelihoods and opportunities of mountain people and the protection and stewardship of mountain environments around the world. It was launched as a Type 2 outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002 and today consists of more than 130 member organizations and Governments. Membership of the Mountain Partnership has grown steadily since the launch of the Partnership at the World Summit, at which time more than 30 Governments and institutions joined.

2. The Mountain Partnership builds on the global alliance of individuals and organizations involved in mountain issues that has grown since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. It captures the momentum created during the International Year of Mountains in 2002, and strives to improve the implementation of chapter 13 of Agenda 21 and to promote, inter alia, joint initiatives based on paragraph 42 of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development ("*Johannesburg Plan of Implementation*") and other related instruments regarding mountains, by enhancing on-the-ground action and working at the policy, programme and project levels.

3. The Mountain Partnership was conceived to provide a new platform for mountain development. Its flexible and open structure allows members to tap the wealth and diversity of resources, information, knowledge and expertise of members, in order to add value to their programmes, projects and activities, to

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identify and promote new mechanisms for cooperation and to build lasting alliances that will bring positive change to mountain regions, whose populations are among the most disadvantaged on Earth.

4. The present report was prepared for the fourteenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development by the Mountain Partnership secretariat at the invitation of the General Assembly in its resolution 60/198. The report provides an update on progress and achievements since the inception of the Mountain Partnership, discusses some of the key challenges facing the Partnership today and provides lessons learned and proposals on how to strengthen the impact and effectiveness of the Partnership. The report does not attempt to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive review of what has been achieved since 2002, but rather highlights significant progress that has been achieved, and draws attention to key issues and challenges that are considered critical to the long-term success of the Partnership. Some of these issues may also be of interest beyond the immediate stakeholders of the Partnership and could be relevant to the effective functioning of other Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships.

II. Organization, structure and membership

5. The Mountain Partnership consists of its members, its defined governance mechanism and its secretariat. As at April 2006, 46 countries, 14 intergovernmental organizations and 73 major group organizations have joined the Mountain Partnership. The governance of the Partnership is based on the principles of democratic participation of all members, accountability, responsiveness, consensus, transparency and flexibility. The structure of the Partnership is non-hierarchical and decentralized. It allows equal participation and optimal connectivity between members. Within the structure, Partnership activities are developed and implemented by the members concerned. The Mountain Partnership secretariat, with financial support from the Governments of Italy and Switzerland, is hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and has the direct involvement of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It acts as a central reference point for information exchange, networking and liaison for Mountain Partnership members and connects them by disseminating knowledge on effective models, good practices, existing mechanisms, agreements and frameworks that could be adapted to suit specific national and regional conditions.

III. Mountain Partnership in the context of all Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships

6. Of the approximately 300 registered partnerships in the Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships database, the Mountain Partnership is among the biggest, with a total of 133 members. Relatively few registered partnerships exist that specifically address the Commission thematic focus of mountains. Mining and biotechnology are the only other thematic areas that have fewer partnerships, considering both primary and secondary themes together.

IV. Achievements/progress

7. In an effort to be consistent with the reporting approach of the secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development with respect to partnerships, the present report describes progress regarding (a) organizational development; (b) coordination activities; and (c) implementation activities.

A. Organizational development

8. During the preparation for the World Summit, efforts were made to establish the conceptual basis for the Mountain Partnership and to rally political support and institutional commitment, in order to engage a critical mass at the time of its official launch. As of September 2002, more than 30 Governments and organizations had stated their intent to join the Mountain Partnership. Following the launch, discussions among key stakeholders, in particular the Governments of Switzerland and Italy, FAO and UNEP, led to financial and in-kind commitments for the establishment of an interim secretariat to support and facilitate the joint efforts of members.

9. During the first year of the Mountain Partnership, members focused on defining the guiding principles and governance mechanism by which the Partnership would function. These principles were developed through an interactive process that resulted in the document "Mountain Partnership: Organization, membership and governance", which was approved by members at their first face-to-face global meeting in late 2003. In that document, the vision and mission, core principles, strategic objectives, structure, membership criteria and governance of the Mountain Partnership are defined.

10. Since its launch, the Mountain Partnership has benefited from financial support provided by three principle donors. The Governments of Switzerland and Italy have shared the cost of establishing and operating what was initially an interim secretariat (2003-2005). That was replaced by a longer-term Mountain Partnership secretariat, which was established in June 2005 and is hosted by FAO at its headquarters in Rome. The secretariat team includes staff, from both FAO and UNEP, who provide a wide range of communication, networking and liaison support and services to members of the Mountain Partnership.

11. In addition, the Government of France has provided financial support to the Mountain Partnership for the promotion of quality mountain products, through a project designed jointly with, and implemented by, FAO under the Mountain Partnership Sustainable Livelihoods Initiative. Funds have been committed since 2003 to better understand the potential of products and services from mountain areas to help increase household income and improve the livelihoods of mountain communities. The project has so far gathered key information and case studies from mountainous regions throughout the world, documenting many valuable examples of how quality mountain products have successfully contributed to sustainable livelihood opportunities through the development of income-generating activities. In the present phase of the project, an information resource centre is being developed to support Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Mediterranean region to pursue work on quality mountain products. Strong interest has also been expressed in other mountain areas outside Europe, and a more

comprehensive programme is being developed, as additional resources are sought to expand activities beyond the Mediterranean region.

B. Coordination activities

12. The Mountain Partnership secretariat was established to facilitate collaborative action of members, and to promote knowledge management, brokering functions and communication exchange. Services are provided that link existing activities in mountain development and that foster synergies and complementarities to promote closer cooperation, avoid duplication and achieve greater coherence in development efforts. The secretariat also has a role in promoting the identification and mobilization of resources and investments for the sustainable development of mountains, by providing information on the availability of funds from all possible sources and by presenting to members options for possible financial mechanisms to assist them in carrying out joint activities. However, the Mountain Partnership secretariat does not coordinate the actions of members, nor does it assign specific tasks and responsibilities to them. Within the Mountain Partnership, the secretariat is responsible for regular reporting on the status and activities of the Partnership to the Commission on Sustainable Development and other relevant bodies.

13. In order to facilitate the organization, coordination and implementation of collaborative action, members designate focal points from their institutions upon joining the Mountain Partnership. These member focal points are the main liaison with the Mountain Partnership secretariat and act as the official representative of each member institution. As such, these individuals play a key role in determining the effectiveness of each member's participation in the Partnership. It should be noted that, although every member of the Partnership has appointed a focal point, several issues related to the effectiveness of these focal points have been identified by the secretariat. These issues are discussed further below.

14. Mountain Partnership members have identified several thematic and geographic areas of activity to help structure and organize their collaborative work.[1] Certain members have identified themselves as "leading members" of those thematic and geographic areas in which they have particular interest, experience and skills in order to play an active coordinating role for specific joint activities. The secretariat works closely with leading members to ensure that all possible means of support are provided to foster and sustain successful activities. Close and often frequent contact is established between member focal points and Mountain Partnership secretariat staff through various communication channels.

15. The Mountain Partnership secretariat continues to build an information and communication network which aims to disseminate information, connect members and promote the exchange of experiences, skills and resources in order to develop and sustain collaborative action. A multilanguage website (in English, French and Spanish) is maintained by the secretariat to deliver timely and relevant information to members, highlight joint activities, provide potential sources of funding for mountain activities and report on news and initiatives related to sustainable

[1] Thematic areas of work include biodiversity, education, gender, policy and law, research, sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountains (SARD-M), sustainable livelihoods and watershed management. Geographic areas of focus include the Andes, Central America and the Caribbean, Central Asia, East Africa, Europe and the Hindu Kush/Himalaya region.

mountain development around the world. In recent months, the number of hits/visits received by the Mountain Partnership website every month has exceeded 1,000. In addition, a monthly newsletter, produced by the secretariat with input from members, is sent to a distribution list of more than 700 recipients in five regions, including all Mountain Partnership members and interested stakeholders from five regions of the world. Efforts are also focused on encouraging dialogue and networking between members and in building electronic communities of practice and knowledge. This is being developed through a Mountain calendar of events and a series of thematic e-consultations, organized by the secretariat in close collaboration with the Mountain Forum, and through the informal electronic discussion spaces on various topics now available on the Mountain Partnership website.

C. Implementation activities

16. Several face-to-face workshops have been organized by the secretariat, providing an opportunity to leading members of the Mountain Partnership to discuss and plan collaborative activities within thematic or geographic groupings. In most cases, these face-to-face meetings have resulted in the definition of a workplan and a concrete set of joint activities. While some of these joint activities were implemented as planned, others have remained in the planning stage. A more thorough exploration of some of the constraints faced can be found in section V below.

17. In Central Asia, efforts are currently under way at the grass-roots level to build stronger alliances among mountain villages. A relatively new member of the Mountain Partnership, the Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities, brings together representatives of villages in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The Alliance organized a meeting in November 2005 to develop closer cooperation among key actors working at the community level in Central Asia and to explore new linkages with mountain communities in other regions of the world. As a result, activities to build stronger organizational capacity and to strengthen governance at a decentralized level are now being developed with Mountain Partnership members from both Governments and civil society groups in the Alpine region.

18. Members of the Mountain Partnership from Latin America are exploring how to tap the potential of ecotourism as a means to promote more effective sustainable development in the Andes and to better integrate ecotourism into development planning in the region, as a whole. Seed money has been mobilized by the Mountain Partnership secretariat to support a feasibility study being carried out by the Consortium for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Ecoregion to assess the potential of ecotourism as a means to improve the livelihoods of mountain communities. Case studies from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru will be used to better understand the linkage between ecotourism and rural development and the various actors involved.

19. Other notable emerging activities within the Mountain Partnership include the development of partnerships in the field of the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in mountain regions, taking into consideration the mountain work programme of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which aims to establish regional and transboundary collaboration and the establishment of cooperative

agreements. Concrete cooperative activities have been launched between Partnership members in various regions of Europe and Asia, facilitated by the Mountain Partnership secretariat.

20. In addition to working together in the above-mentioned thematic or geographic areas, some Mountain Partnership members are also undertaking activities in cross-cutting and interdisciplinary areas of work. In 2005, an initiative was launched to explore the potential of broadband communication technologies for mountain communities and to test these technologies in selected areas with a view to improving the communication capacity of mountain communities and reducing the technological and digital divide between mountain and lowland areas. Both member and non-member institutions of the Mountain Partnership were involved in carrying out a feasibility study, which has so far resulted in a preliminary understanding of the prerequisites and the conditions for broadband application in mountains and the extent to which broadband technologies could support the development of mountain communities, based on priority needs in terms of information and communications. This focus on the application and use of broadband technologies is one of the few activities within the Mountain Partnership that involves significant input from private sector members. These members are currently considering both financial and in-kind technical contributions to advance the Mountain Partnership broadband activity into a field-testing phase in selected mountain areas of Eastern Europe and North Africa. This work phase will involve assessing the needs of local communities and small- and medium-size enterprises; testing the broadband technology; evaluating the benefits, relevance and impact; and exploring the possibility of adoption on a larger scale.

21. Microfinance for mountain communities is another important cross-cutting activity being pursued by several members of the Mountain Partnership, in order to examine the relevance and potential of this tool to be more effectively applied in mountain areas. The secretariat is providing consulting expertise on a short-term basis to work with interested members to develop a more thorough understanding of the constraints and opportunities related to microfinance and mountains, and to explore the possibility of developing a more long-term strategy and set of activities to make microfinance a more accessible and useful working tool for members. Interaction among members on the development of this topic is under way on the collaborative workspace "Discussion on-line", on the Mountain Partnership website. In this context, Soluciones Prácticas, a Mountain Partnership member, is carrying out a financial needs assessment and analysis of coffee and dairy producers in the Cajamarca region of Peru, through funding provided by the FAO/United Kingdom Department for International Development Livelihood Support Programme. This study builds on a previous analysis of the constraints, challenges and opportunities in terms of production, processing and marketing of these mountain product subsectors.

22. Significant progress is being made in furthering interregional and intraregional cooperation within the framework of the Mountain Partnership. Many members are recognizing that the Mountain Partnership is a dynamic mechanism in which to exchange experiences, knowledge and information within their own mountain regions and beyond. For example, several conferences and workshops have recently been held in the context of the Mountain Partnership to explore how existing legally binding conventions, such as the Alpine Convention and the Carpathian Convention, could provide insight, expertise and inspiration for the launch of similar

collaborative arrangements in other mountainous areas of the world. In this spirit, representatives of Governments and civil society groups from the Caucasus and the South-Eastern European mountain areas met in December 2005 in Bolzano, Italy, to begin exploring the possibility of developing conventions (or other types of regional cooperation) to improve mountain livelihoods and environments. Strong interest has also been expressed in setting up similar mechanisms in the Hindu Kush/Himalaya and the Andes mountain regions.

23. Decentralized cooperation, i.e. cooperation among subnational authorities such as regions, provinces and municipalities, has recently received increased attention in the Mountain Partnership as an important and potentially very effective mechanism for sustainable mountain development. With the current trend to decentralize responsibility for development issues to more local levels of Government, new opportunities are now available to tap into the practical hands-on experience of local authorities and develop activities that are complementary to those supported by national Governments. Today many local authorities in western Europe devote part of their budget to cooperation activities in developing countries and countries in transition. The Mountain Partnership secretariat is working with FAO and other members of the Partnership, including several decentralized authorities, to offer an integrated and coherent context for these activities in mountain areas. Many local authorities have expressed an interest in carrying out cooperation with their counterparts in other countries and regions in a more effective and coherent manner and are welcoming this opportunity to develop these activities under the umbrella of the Mountain Partnership. A survey was recently conducted to understand the extent of development cooperation activities undertaken by European decentralized authorities in other mountain areas of the world. If adequate financial resources can be mobilized, a workshop is planned to take place in June 2006 to bring together representatives of decentralized authorities from Europe and developing countries in efforts to define specific collaborative activities in a more coherent and integrated context.

V. Challenges

24. Now in its third year, the Mountain Partnership is at a critical juncture. Significant progress has been made in certain areas, in particular in defining a functional organizational structure and governance mechanism, as well as making operational the support structures necessary to promote and facilitate joint action among its members. Coordinating mechanisms have also been developed within the membership, including member-designated focal points who are intended to foster liaison and communication among members and with the secretariat, and to enhance and facilitate more active involvement of members in collaborative work. During this start-up period several important challenges or constraints to developing a more effective action-oriented Mountain Partnership have been identified by the secretariat and key members. These issues are described below and, if conscientiously addressed by all concerned stakeholders, would likely allow the Mountain Partnership to more fully realize its potential of becoming a truly effective means of increasing collaborative action in mountain regions and adding value to the programmes, projects and activities of its members.

A. Scope of activities and level of involvement by members

25. Unlike many Commission partnerships, which tend to focus on a specific topic related to the Commission programme of work, the Mountain Partnership is open to addressing virtually any issue of sustainable development in mountain ecosystems that members care to address. Both thematic and geographic coverage of mountain issues within the Partnership is open-ended and potentially quite vast, especially since actions within the Mountain Partnership are intended to be demand-driven.

26. In the preliminary operational phase of the Mountain Partnership, an initial set of themes and geographic regions was identified, within which members began to develop specific and concrete collaborative activities. These areas of work were based on members' expressed interest, individual experience and pre-existing collaboration. New areas of cooperation are always possible since the process aims to be flexible, open-ended and responsive to members' specific interests, needs and concerns in sustainable mountain development. Providing some structural framework for joint action has allowed for more focused and effective provision of support by the secretariat and was seen as an important means to mobilize members in the development of specific action within a defined work area. Although this approach may not have been purely demand-driven at the start, it did have a catalysing effect and allowed for a more focused effort in a few selected areas by concentrating resources, support, experience and expertise.

27. One of the key issues currently being addressed by the secretariat is how to more effectively mobilize members to be more actively involved in the Mountain Partnership. Although the Partnership now has 133 members, the level of activity of most members is relatively low. In general, civil society members tend to be more active than those of Governments. Government focal points tend often to be politically appointed or responsible for Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships in general, rather than having a specific mandate, interest or knowledge of mountain issues. On the other hand, some of the designated focal points from major group organizations have a very limited technical or geographic focus and lack a comprehensive overview of their entire organization, thereby preventing the relevant mountain-specific experience of their organization being brought to the Mountain Partnership. This is particularly true for some of the larger international NGOs. A concerted effort is under way by the secretariat to address this issue and to assist certain focal points and their organizations to be more fully engaged in Mountain Partnership activities and to gain benefit and value from membership.

28. Another issue related to the effective mobilization of members is to ensure that joint activities proposed by and for members of the Mountain Partnership are closely aligned with existing or planned activities of members, or indeed consistent with the core mandate of their respective organizations. Experience to date has shown that it is much more difficult to stimulate action around new proposed activities, even though these proposals may have received a strong initial expression of interest and/or initial commitment by those involved. Several of the "new" thematic or geographic areas of work in the Mountain Partnership have not resulted in the intended outputs that were defined by members, mainly because these areas required new, additional and often labour-intensive commitments to the already very full agendas of members. This realization has led the secretariat to review and revise its support to members, assisting them to build on existing activities for which time and resources have already been committed, and thereby adding value to members

working in partnership. This more pragmatic approach to supporting members requires a more thorough knowledge and understanding by the secretariat of members' existing programme activities and priorities in mountain development issues, so that it can effectively help identify and facilitate opportunities for joint action.

B. Size

29. The overall membership of the Mountain Partnership has become a recent issue of concern, as it is among the largest of all Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships in terms of the number of members. As a voluntary alliance, no limits to membership have been established and the membership remains open-ended. Whereas significant effort was made by the secretariat to publicize and promote the benefits of membership during the early development of the Mountain Partnership, efforts are now focused on consolidating and facilitating a greater level of activity by existing members. Although it is not clear what effect an increasingly large membership would have on the overall effectiveness and impact of the Mountain Partnership, it is quite certain that the capacity of the secretariat to support its members may become increasingly limited as the number of members increases beyond a certain point, assuming the secretariat continues to function with its current level of resources.

C. Type of member

30. The Mountain Partnership consists of a wide range of members from Governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society groups and the private sector. Among civil society group members there is a wide variety of organizations, some of which work at very different scales. This can have a significant effect on the manner in which members are able to interact and presents certain challenges with respect to support from the secretariat. Members from this category range from large international organizations with a rather complex institutional structure that works at different levels, to small NGOs that have a particular thematic focus to their work and limited geographic scope within just one country. Such diversity creates a need for providing very different kinds of support from the secretariat. Given the relatively large size of the Mountain Partnership, the secretariat is limited in how much support it can provide to members. If the Mountain Partnership continues to grow, a more targeted or selective approach will be required, unless the capacity of the secretariat increases proportionally.

D. Private sector

31. To date, very few for-profit private-sector companies have joined the Mountain Partnership. However, those members who have joined from the private sector have generally played an active role, which is not limited to or even focused primarily on the provision of financial means, but has tended rather to have a strong technical assistance component. Given the spirit and intent at the World Summit regarding an important private-sector role in Type 2 Commission partnerships and the potential for higher and more lasting impact of Mountain Partnership activities with increased

private-sector involvement, a more strategic approach and concerted effort to build membership in this category is needed. Although the benefits to for-profit companies of being directly involved in sustainable development activities may be more obvious in some of the other Commission partnerships, certain untapped opportunities do exist in mountain regions that could have strong appeal to the private sector because of their potential to generate profits or their attractiveness in terms of increased visibility of association with issues and activities that are viewed as socially acceptable, responsible and/or environmentally friendly.

E. Political versus operational support

32. The Mountain Partnership secretariat increasingly faces the issue of achieving an appropriate balance between devoting time and energy to maintaining strong political support for the Partnership, and efforts to provide more operational support to members for specific activities on the ground. During the first few years of the existence of the Mountain Partnership, an important activity was to build and maintain the political momentum of the World Summit. The main outcome of the first global meeting of members of the Mountain Partnership (Merano, Italy, October 2003) was increased political commitment and support, whereas the second global meeting of members (Cusco, Peru, October 2004) focused more on making the Partnership "work". Given the general consensus among members that the Mountain Partnership will only be considered successful in achieving World Summit objectives if it enables greater action on the ground in mountain areas, there has been increasing recognition that the secretariat should engage primarily on operational support to members. Therefore, although political momentum and support for the Mountain Partnership is still undoubtedly necessary, the primary focus of the work of the secretariat is now on operational issues, on developing and strengthening the Mountain Partnership and on meeting the needs of its members in areas such as information exchange, networking, brokerage and resource mobilization.

F. Funding

33. The prospect of mobilizing new funds and financial mechanisms to carry out joint activities is viewed by many members as integral to the success of the Mountain Partnership, and the secretariat has been tasked to play a proactive role towards that end. Although the Mountain Partnership has had the benefit of a dedicated secretariat as a result of financial support from the Governments of Switzerland and Italy, as well as contributions from FAO and UNEP, significant funding for collaborative activities is not available through the secretariat (or any other dedicated source), nor was this service intended when the Mountain Partnership was established. However, it should be noted that very modest funding has been provided on occasion to initiate or catalyse joint activities by members, in particular to organize small workshops or meetings that aim to support members in defining and planning collaborative initiatives. In several cases, the relatively small investments have reaped positive results. This financial support has been instrumental in engaging members who would not otherwise have had the means to collaborate and in promoting a partnership-building process for joint action. Based on experience and results to date, continued funding of this type would likely be

important to facilitate the greater involvement of certain members in Partnership activities.

VI. Conclusions and lessons learned

34. **Just over three years since the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Mountain Partnership is becoming increasingly operational as a voluntary alliance of stakeholders working towards the sustainable development of mountain areas. The membership of the Partnership continues to grow, although the number of members has stabilized compared to the rapid growth during the period following its launch in 2002. More members are seeing the value of carrying out activities in the context of the Mountain Partnership, as this generally provides greater recognition and new opportunities for developing collaboration and generating funding. Based on the experience of the Mountain Partnership to date, several key conclusions and lessons learned can be drawn that may provide insight into how to overcome certain challenges and lead to more effective collaboration on mountain issues. These include:**

(a) **Partnership-building is an evolving process that requires adequate time, effort and support in order to be effective. Expectations of how fast effective partnerships would evolve when first launched at the World Summit were in many cases unrealistic. A similar conclusion has been shared by a number of Commission on Sustainable Development partnerships during discussions at the Partnerships Fair held annually at each Commission session in New York, and has been raised on other occasions, most notably at the preparatory events for the Commission Partnership Forum held in Rome in 2003 and the one held in Morocco in 2005, respectively. There is no template for building and sustaining a multistakeholder Commission partnership, just as there is no standard approach to enhancing cooperation among stakeholders with similar interests. In many cases, these partnerships represent the first serious attempt to foster real collaboration among Governments, civil society and the private sector, actors who historically have not worked closely in partnership. From the perspective of the secretariat, a significant investment of time by secretariat staff continues to be necessary to help many members develop a sound understanding of the benefits, value and opportunities of enhanced partnership, as well as the expected (and potential) roles and responsibilities of each member. This is an important reason for the (often) long delay between a member joining the Partnership and actually engaging in its activities.**

(b) **In addition, the notion of partnership is a quite new and dynamic concept. The partnership-building process evolves over time, sometimes quite significantly, in response to the needs, conditions and priorities of its membership, the prevailing political context, and funding requisites, among other issues. Developing and making effective multistakeholder partnerships, such as the Mountain Partnership, therefore requires the willingness, capacity and flexibility to adapt and change direction when needed in order to achieve results.**

(c) In multistakeholder partnerships, such as the Mountain Partnership, there is wide diversity, not only with respect to the type of member (Government, intergovernmental organization, civil society or private sector), but also in terms of the respective institutional culture of each member. That diversity requires different ways and means of developing collaboration between members and a flexible approach by the secretariat to understand and accommodate these cultural differences and values.

(d) Virtual or electronic means of information sharing, knowledge exchange and dialogue are essential to building and sustaining collaboration among Mountain Partnership members. However, technology is not a "quick-fix" solution for a significant number of Mountain Partnership members, many of whom live in developing countries and have insufficient or non-existent Internet connectivity. Nor can information and communication technologies ever replace the real benefits of face-to-face meetings of individuals. Within the Mountain Partnership, face-to-face meetings, such as workshops, seminars and side events, have proven invaluable in allowing members to better understand each other's aims and needs and, in many cases, have allowed for personal relationships to develop that have been a key factor in sustaining collaboration over time. The higher costs involved in organizing such events is, in most cases, justified, judging from the results and the feedback provided by members.

(e) There are tangible benefits in exchanging experiences, approaches and results among the different Commission partnerships. To date, important opportunities to do so have been provided at the annual Commission Partnerships Fair and at related preparatory events organized prior to those sessions. However, the resources available to the Commission secretariat for partnership support are meagre and inadequate, in comparison with the needs and demands for strong and regular support from the more than 300 official Commission partnerships. A more systematic approach and a stronger capacity by the Commission secretariat to foster exchange and dialogue could provide a significant pay-off in terms of more effective implementation within each partnership and a strengthened collaboration between and among partnerships, where appropriate. The Mountain Partnership has clearly benefited from the active encouragement and participation of the Commission secretariat in the aforementioned events, but the Mountain Partnership secretariat recognizes the potential scope for and benefits of much greater exchange and linkages among all Commission partnerships in the future. From the perspective of the Mountain Partnership secretariat, a modest increase in the capacity of the Commission secretariat to provide greater support is fully warranted and makes good sense.